

John Bull\*

# Introduction

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Suppose that one day, after a nuclear war, an intergalactic historian lands on a now dead planet in order to enquire into the cause of the remote little catastrophe which the censors of his galaxy have recorded [ . . . ] Our observer, after some study, will conclude that the last two centuries of the human history of planet Earth are incomprehensible without some understanding of the term ‘nation’ and the vocabulary derived from it. This term appears to express something important in human affairs. But what exactly? Here lies the mystery. (Hobsbawm 1)

I

There is, for me at least, a delightful irony in the fact that I should be writing the introduction to this collection of essays based on the proceedings of the 26<sup>th</sup> annual Contemporary Drama in English conference, on “Nation, Nationalism and Theatre,” held at the University of Reading (UK) in June/July 2017. For John Bull is, or more realistically was, regarded as the popular iconic figure epitomising the robust and patriotic cheerfulness of the English people.<sup>1</sup> It is an identification that goes back to 1712, when he first made an appearance in John Arbuthnot’s *The History of John Bull*, an allegorical satire on the fag-end of the War of the Spanish Succession (1701–1714), where his protagonist struggles with Louis Baboon (Louis XIV of France) concerning the estate of the late Lord Strutt (Charles II, who had died without an heir, as the last Habsburg monarch of Spain).

Arbuthnot had been, amongst other things, a physician to Queen Anne, whose reign (1702–1714) had seen the signing of the belated Acts of Union of 1707, after negotiations lasting just about a century from the accession of James VI of Scotland to the throne of England as James I, to become the first to be known as King of Great Britain. With Wales having already been annexed by England in the sixteenth century, and Ireland effectively conquered in the reign of Henry VIII, Great Britain was now a political entity. In his BBC TV series ‘The History of

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<sup>1</sup> In visual, usually cartoon, images, he was increasingly swathed in the Union flag. His surname, with its suggestion that he was a hearty beef-eater, has led to the popular French label of the British as Les Rosbifs.

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Britain,' the historian Simon Schama argued that "What began as a hostile merger would end in a full partnership in the most powerful going concern in the world [. . .] one of the most astonishing transformations in European history." The process was completed with the Act of Union of 1800, bringing Scotland into what now became known as the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland. After the Irish War of Independence (1919–1921), an Anglo-Irish Treaty was signed (1922), with the larger part of the island becoming a republic, the Irish Free State: and the other six north-eastern counties becoming a part of what was then to be known as the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. This cumbersome title rapidly became shortened to Great Britain, and then Britain and, after the Second World War, the United Kingdom (UK).

The complicated nature of this relationship can be illustrated with reference to the global sporting arena. At international level, such sports as football and rugby are contested by the individual components of the union, England, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales – as well as by Ireland (Eire). At the Commonwealth Games – originally the British Empire Games (from 1930), and then the British Empire and Commonwealth Games (from 1954), not only are the constituent countries all separately represented, but so are smaller island parts of the union, Guernsey, Jersey and the Isle of Man. However, at the Olympic Games, the union is represented by the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland, branded since 1999 as Team GB. Furthermore, there are no better occasions than these to see and to hear the full euphoria of national feeling – produced also by spectators from 'rival' nations – when success arrives, as sometimes it does.

The concepts of nation, nationhood, nationalism and nationality form a part of any contemporary account of geopolitical organisation, but this has not always been the case. As Ernest Gellner, the man regarded by many scholars as the godfather of nationalism theory has it: "Culture and social organisation are universal and perennial. States and nationalisms are not" (Gellner, *Nationalism* 5). There is considerable disagreement about exactly when the idea of nationhood first emerged: in particular, whether or not the concept can be associated with modernity, the beginnings of industrialisation and capitalism, or whatever. Gellner is characteristically blunt on the issue: "nationalism is rooted in modernity" (Gellner, *Nationalism* 12). It is an identification strongly rejected by, amongst many others, Adrian Hastings: "nation-formation and nationalism have almost nothing to do with modernity" (Hastings 205). Others, and most notably Benedict Anderson, have talked about the idea of the nation as something almost outside of history. He labels it an imagined "political community:" "It is *imagined* because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion" (Anderson 5).

However, the consensus is that the idea of the ‘Nation’ in its modern sense dates from the Eighteenth and, particularly, the Nineteenth centuries. France, Germany and Italy, for example, all became nation states in the latter part of the Eighteenth Century: though it is from the second half of the Nineteenth Century that debate about the nature of nationalism really began to emerge (on this, see Lawrence 17–50). However, in this volume the concern will be less with establishing an historical time-line for ideas on nation, nationhood and nationality, and more with seeing how these concepts are realised and used in a contemporary context as constructed in theatre and performance: though obviously such contemporary usages depend to a very large part on different purchases on that time-line, for in any conflicted political situation, opposing ideas of the notion of nationhood will be central to the weaving of the ideological banners waved by each side. However, today the real building blocks of the modern concept of nationhood are capitalism and industrialisation: together they combine to produce the weapons of war that are the ultimate assertion of nationalism,<sup>2</sup> global politics ensuring that, even for the poorest conflicted nations, these weapons are always purchasable – at a price. But, in order to come to terms with the current situation, it will be useful to briefly revisit the past, in order to consider the tension between an idealised notion of the relationship between theatre and nation and an oppositional one, the latter of which being essentially what most of the essays in this collection are concerned with.

Post the French Revolution, Friedrich Schiller wrote:

A standing theatre would be a material advantage to a nation. It would have a great influence on the national temper and mind by helping the nation to agree in opinions and inclinations. The stage alone can do this because it commands all human knowledge, exhausts all positions, illumines all hearts, unites all classes, and makes its way to the heart and understanding by the most popular channels. (Schiller 279)

In this way he thought that theatre could help not only to establish national values but also to create a new German nation. Citing this, in *Theatre, Society and the Nation: Staging American Identities*, S.E. Wilner argues that, “In Europe in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, plays and the theatre became important sites for expressing notions of national identity both in established nation-states and in emergent nations” (Wilner 2). This belief can be evidenced by the terms of reference of the strong arguments put forward for the creation of a national theatre in both Ireland and England in the latter half of the nineteenth century.

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<sup>2</sup> This is, of course, the implication in the quotation from Eric Hobsbawm with which I opened this Introduction.

For example, W.B. Yeats, Lady Gregory and Edward Martyn issued an 1897 “Manifesto for Irish Literary Theatre,” a theatre that would help to define and proclaim the idea of Irish nationhood by performing plays about Ireland written by Irish authors. It was, of course, ultimately to take shape in Dublin’s Abbey Theatre. In England, G.B. Shaw,<sup>3</sup> amongst others, campaigned for a National Theatre in London, many years before it even began to be perceived as the concrete reality that it eventually became.

However, by the time that the present National Theatre building on the South Bank of the Thames was first used in 1976, ideas about what a national theatre might signify, and what it might be expected to stage, had changed, as had any such consensus about its function as a beacon of national values. That year, Howard Brenton, a playwright who had begun in the world of alternative theatre before working at the Nottingham Playhouse during Richard Eyre’s period as Artistic Director (1973–78),<sup>4</sup> was commissioned to write what would be the first new play in the theatre, *Weapons of Happiness*. When it opened in the Lyttelton Auditorium, it heralded the arrival of what came to be known as state-of-the-nation theatre, plays that offered an oppositional and Marxist or quasi-Marxist take on the contemporary world. Its intent is far removed from the idealistic relationship posited by Schiller. With reference to North American theatre, Wilner makes a similar distinction, stating that in *Theatre, Society and the Nation: Staging American Identities*, rather than “focusing on hegemonic nationalism” he will concentrate “as much on counter-hegemonic and subaltern discourses” (Wilner 3).

In her *Theatre & Nation*, Nadine Holdsworth is clearly aware of this key distinction that Wilner and others make between the hegemonic and counter-hegemonic models of theatre, but from the outset she announces her intention to concentrate on the latter: she makes the point strongly:

The core of my argument is that the vast majority of theatre practices that engage with the nation, directly or obliquely, do so to respond to moments of rupture, crisis or conflict. My argument, then, is that theatre often deploys its content, formal properties and aesthetic pleasures to generate a creative dialogue with tensions in the national fabric [. . .] I argue that theatre opens up a creative space for exploring the paradoxes, ambiguities and complexities around issues of tradition, identity, authenticity and belonging associated with the nation. (Holdsworth 7)

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<sup>3</sup> Who was actually an Irishman by birth, as he elaborates on in complicated detail in his long introduction, *Preface for Politicians* (1906), to the published version of his 1902 play *John Bull’s Other Island*, one of the two only plays that the writer set in Ireland.

<sup>4</sup> Years in which he commissioned plays such as Brenton and David Hare’s *Brassneck* (1973), Brenton’s *The Churchill Play* and Trevor Griffiths’ *Comedians* (both 1975), all of which can be seen as oppositional in their stance towards the traditional, somewhat cosy construction of the nation.

This is to place the theatre and the plays performed there in a very specific ideological position, and one that is directly related to issues of nation and nationhood.

Given that the world has been increasingly felt to be shaped by global rather than national forces, and that – in the words of Dan Rebellato – “Globalization is a specifically *economic* phenomenon” (Rebellato 10),<sup>5</sup> the theatre is, of course, subject to the same market forces as any other product, cultural or not. That is to say that if any of the vast majority of plays in the commercial sector do “engage with the nation,” they do so *extremely* obliquely. This is why the fact of subsidy by the state is absolutely instrumental in producing a theatre that can critique, question or satirise the nation, why, in effect, it is empowered to bite the hand that feeds it. It is also why many critics would argue that the process is, or is capable of becoming, one of self-containment: in its extreme embodiment, put all the political liberals (substitute this for anti-Brexiteers or whatever) in a separable place and allow them to critique to their heart’s content. And this would seem a good point to return to the National Theatre.

## II

In June 2017, Inua Ellams’s *Barber Shop Chronicles* opened at the Dorfman auditorium at London’s National Theatre. In the programme/script, the theatre sets out what is effectively a manifesto for its times. Its text includes the following: “The National Theatre makes world-class theatre that is entertaining, challenging and inspiring. And we make it for everyone [. . .] The work we make strives to be as open, as diverse, as collaborative and as national as possible.” Clearly this sense of ‘national,’ with its linkage to openness, diversity and collaboration, is a multicultural one, and it is no way meant to suggest a homogeneous model of the nation, either as an ideal or as a reality. And certainly, on the evidence of the audience alone, it was apparent that there was present a far greater diversity of peoples than is normally to be found in the National Theatre. Word had clearly got around that this was something very different from the usual fare on offer, not the least reason being that there was not a single white actor in the cast.

Ellams’s play was set in a 360-degree set, perhaps suggestive of the entire globe, a suggestion augmented by the fact that the action took place in six men’s barbershops in cities in six different nations: from the UK (Peckham in South

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<sup>5</sup> I would agree with Rebellato, but would prefer to describe it as a politico-economic phenomenon, as power and money have proved very amenable bed-fellows.

London), to Nigeria (Lagos), to Ghana (Accra), to Uganda (Kampala), to South Africa (Johannesburg), to Zimbabwe (Harare). The African locations are in a mixture of past and present capital cities and, in the case of South Africa, which technically does not have a single capital, its largest city. But what they all have in common, of course, is that they were all, prior to Independence, a part of the British Empire, and in the case of Nigeria, Ghana and South Africa are still a part of the Commonwealth.

Ellams uses the barbershop as the natural meeting-point – the equivalent of the pub as one character explains – for African and Caribbean men, a place where stories can be told and re-told, and where male rivalries and male insecurities can be revealed: the latter, in particular with reference to the men's accounts of their relationships with the absent presence in the play, women. As we move from one barbershop and from one country to another, a link is made between the various locations in that the men in England and in Africa are all intent on following the progress of a football game, a European cup match between Chelsea and Barcelona. They do so, expressing strong vocal solidarity with one or other of the teams without any apparent geographical reason for their individual allegiance – though the Chelsea football ground is in South London, Barcelona has no obvious connection with either where the men come from originally or where they find themselves currently. So, there is an arbitrary tribal allegiance (football) layered over a sense of national identity that contains within it tribal allegiances that predate the construction of the nation, and which in turn veers between that of their homeland in Africa and for many of the characters their, perhaps temporary, residence in Britain. In a sense, Chelsea football club signifies the UK, and Barcelona, the foreign, the other: but from the dialogue it is clear that the decision to opt for one or the other is both arbitrary and confused – as confused, indeed, as their sense of who they are in cultural and national terms. In Scene 4, for example, there is a heated debate about the desirability of keeping pidgin pure, a debate that is taking place in a London Barber Shop with four characters present, who are described as British and Nigerian, Nigerian, Nigerian and Caribbean. Where do you find a sense of nation in all that: or perhaps more pertinently, why should you wish to find a sense of nation at all?

As the play proceeds it becomes increasingly evident that, in a manner reminiscent of John Guare's 1990 play, *Six Degrees of Separation*, there are threads of connection between all of the characters, no matter where they originated or where they now find themselves; and that the apparently disconnected stories they tell, are all in fact constituent parts of a single narrative that will be resolved at the end of the play. These threads of connection are, however, greater than the sum of the total number of characters in the plays. The play, which was a joyous thing from beginning to end, with a mixture of black music from many different

sources that had the audience on its feet and at times a part of the action – before the first scene, for example, when members of the audience were invited on-stage to have a (mimed) haircut, and to dance to the music which would punctuate every location switch.

The political arguments between barbers and customers were frequently vociferous – for instance over whether the Nigerian presidency of Goodluck Jonathan, between 2010–2015, had been a good or a bad thing – but Ellams is careful to stress the sense of togetherness, to emphasise the things that unite rather than those that divide. However, it is not a piece of agit-prop theatre, and the conflicting arguments are allowed to take shape. As such it was, overall, a celebration, albeit a celebration not without its very pointed moments. However, over all this there was a dark cloud that was not theatrical. Ellams was twelve years old when he and his family fled from Nigeria in the face of threats and the disappearance of an uncle. He has been settled in the UK for twenty years, but does not have citizenship or any certainty of being allowed to stay. He has only a discretionary permission to stay in the UK, and that has to be reapplied for every three years, the next occasion being shortly after the opening of his play at the National.

Now, *Barber Shop Chronicles* is by no means the only contemporary play to address issues of nationality on the National's stages. In 2005, David Edgar quite consciously recalled his 1976 play *Destiny* with *Playing with Fire*, where a clash between New and Old Labour in a Yorkshire town not a million miles from Bradford is played out against increasing racial tension and, ultimately rioting. Like a number of plays staged at the National this century, issues of nationality and nationalism are central to the action and, in this instance, particular questions are asked about the relationship between established members of the nation and new and putative ones. The culture clash is not just between Old and New Labour. Richard Bean's scathing satire, *Great Britain* of 2014, may lack the political venom of the state-of-the-nation plays of the 1970s, but – as its title might suggest – is in every other way entitled to be labelled as such. Michael Billington wrote of it: "Richard Bean doesn't do things by halves. His new satirical comedy has a go at press, police and politicians, and covers just about every scandal of the past five years from phone-tapping to MPs' expenses." Bean had preceded that with another National Theatre play, *England People Very Nice*, of 2009, which "presents itself as, perhaps, the dress rehearsal for a play about successive waves of immigration into Britain, written and performed by a [an ethnically] mixed group of asylum seekers in the Pocklington Immigration Centre" (Bull 129): a group of individuals waiting anxiously to see if they will be allowed to stay, even as they – largely comically – re-enact the history of their predecessors' arrival in East London.

But, if the National Theatre is seriously attempting to meet its own brief – “to be as open, as diverse, as collaborative and as national as possible” – it is faced with its own paradox. If the National Theatre of Scotland was instituted in 2006 as a touring company without a theatrical base, then the National Theatre situated in London has a theatrical base but no identifiable nation. Of what nation is it the theatre? This ambiguity now seems of central, and positive importance in a context in which diversity is not only to be addressed but celebrated, in which multiculturalism opposes nationalism. For the National Theatre to be nationless seems entirely appropriate. But if it is nationless, then it also aspires to be global in terms of its programmed diversity, both of plays and audiences.

Now questions of nation, of nationalism and of nationality are often thought to have been largely replaced by the greater impact of globalisation but, perhaps they are concepts that are so quintessentially indefinable, they not only refuse to leave the populist arena but are frequently invoked in attempts to persuade the spectators to, as it were, vote with their feet. Certainly, if a company has more capital than a medium sized nation, then it has the power to mould, to effect and to influence. But increasingly, this is the situation not just with companies but with individuals. Forbes World Billionaires listings for 2018 revealed that there are currently a record number of billionaires, 2,208, collectively worth over \$9 trillion, whilst the top ten richest people in the world are worth \$766 billion. For the new nationalism is a two-sided thing. On one hand, it is something to be invoked by governments or political leaders as a rallying-call that will tolerate no opposition. And from the other side of the political constituency, it derives to a very considerable extent from an opposition to the very notion of a political model of globalism, that is to say, the EC, for example, rather than Multinational corporations – whether it be on a personal or an organised group scale. It is a nationalism that may superficially appear to appeal to the traditional rather comfortable model of mutual cultural interests, but it is actually a nationalism based on the imperative to scapegoat and to exclude the other. Hence, the logical construction to be made from Trump’s ‘Make America Great Again’ mantra is not just the creation of trade tariffs and the like, but its ultimate manifestation, the craziness of a wall between the USA and Mexico. For, this nationalism is about exclusion, it is about borders: be it in Britain, the populist resistance to the legal arrival of EC citizens, and hence a reason to have voted Brexit: or throughout Europe and elsewhere increasingly fenced attempts to prevent political refugees from war and persecution from moving westward. It is a nationalism that appeals, in particular, to two groups: to the rich and the powerful, be they companies or individuals, and frequently both, as a wieldable tool with which to effect public discourse and decision-making, appealing always to the lowest common denominator; and chiefly – though by no means exclusively – to those people who see



themselves at the bottom of the social pile, being led always to search for a ‘other’ to blame for their situation: be they immigrant or be they refugee, they sure ain’t British. It is an invocation of nationalism that historically, as well as already currently, has led to tyranny, oppression and the assumption of power by anti-democratic leaders.

The essays in this collection address these and many other related issues in terms of theatrical representations and practices, at a time when they seem more pressing than ever.

### III

Dan Rebellato opens the collection with an expression of rage that dates from “early in the morning of Friday 24 June 2016, when it became clear that Britain had narrowly voted in favour of leaving the European Union:” one event, amongst many others, that has provided the immediate context for the period between the initial call for papers (just two days before the referendum) and the conference itself. He then seeks to identify the essential dichotomy between the ‘Brexiters’ and the ‘Remainers,’ mapping the geographical concentration of theatre-goers against that of the latter. His conclusion – “rather than seeing voting for Brexit as an ignorant decision, it may be more important to understand it as an expression of capital deprivation” – leads him to open up the debate into a larger one that takes as its starting-point a further binary of ‘Somewheres’ and ‘Anywheres:’ the former strongly attached to “place, to locality, to nationhood,” the latter “comfortable with things like immigration, human rights legislation, and European integration, and relatively unconcerned if that seems to dilute national identity.” Although he rejects the simplicity of the division – a concept posited by David Goodhart (2017) – Rebellato then adapts the model to consider a range of contemporary British plays that offer a deliberately unlocated setting, perhaps in “an attempt to stage a community without boundaries, without identity, a world of infinite democracy, a gesture towards a world between and beyond somewhere and everywhere.”

In “‘Can I Tell You about It?’: England, Austerity and ‘Radical Optimism’ in the Theatre of Anders Lustgarten,” Chris Megson concentrates on Lustgarten’s 2013 Royal Court play *If You Won’t Let Us Dream, We Won’t Let You Sleep*. Specifically inspired by the Occupy movement of 2011–2012, in which anti-capitalist protesters created a makeshift tented village in ground next to St. Paul’s Cathedral, the play continues with the playwright’s insistence on placing “social and political issues centre-stage, ranging from the housing crisis and the electoral ascendancy of far-right parties to the alienation of the urban working-class and the racist scapegoating of immigrants.” Megson relates the play to the tradition of

state-of-the-nation plays dating from the 1970s on, and sees in Lustgarten's notion of "Radical Optimism" in the face of the 2007–2008 global financial crisis a serious challenge to this tradition.

William Boles takes on a specific aspect of Lustgarten's *If You Won't Let Us Sleep*, the housing crisis created by the laissez-faire policies of successive British governments, in "Theatricalising the National Housing Crisis in Mike Bartlett's *Game* and Philip Ridley's *Radiant Vermin*." Both plays, somewhat in the spirit of Jonathan Swift's 1729 satire, *A Modest Proposal* – which argued that the only sensible way to solve the problem of poverty in Ireland was for the well-off to eat the less well-off – posit that the victimisation of the homeless is the crucial solution to not only solving the housing crisis in Britain, but also maintaining the status quo of Britain's affluent population. Boles contextualises the roots of the crisis and its contemporary implications both for the individual and for the nation, and then presents an in-depth analysis of these wickedly black comedies, noting the complicity of their audiences in the day-to-day effects of that crisis.

In "#Black Lives Matter: Remembering Mark Duggan and David Oluwale in Contemporary British Plays," Lynette Goddard compares and contrasts two very different plays that "respond to cases in which the police have been implicated in the deaths of black men." Gillian Slovo's Tricycle Theatre production of 2011, *The Riots*, uses verbatim interviews from witnesses and politicians to analyse events in the lead-up to, and then during, the riots in Tottenham, North London, and their subsequent spread to other inner cities after police had shot Mark Duggan dead in August of that year. She notes that in Slovo's desire to cover the larger picture, Mark Duggan "disappears from the narrative," and contrasts this with Oladipo Agboluaje's *The Hounding of David Oluwale* (2009), which concentrates closely on the hounding and death of the man who gives the play its title. Goddard considers the "effectiveness of both plays as memorializations of black lives," and their contribution to continuing debates about "the relationship between black men and the police in Britain."

Ellen Redling's "Fake News and Drama: Nationalism, Immigration and the Media in Recent British Plays" is written very much in the wake of Donald Trump's election to the presidency of the USA and the result of the EC referendum in Britain. Both events are, as she argues, surrounded with accusations and counter-accusations concerning the deliberate use of fake news to influence public opinion and thus affect the result of the supposedly democratic vote. In particular, she considers the major role that social media has played in the spreading of targeted 'fake news.' Having considered the issues arising from the growing practice on a global scale, and its creation of a "widespread feeling of uncertainty in the Western world, which in turn can be found at the root of a growth in nationalism and power of authoritarian leaders," she looks at the work

of a number of contemporary playwrights who have sought to address the issue in their work – Mark Jagasia, Dennis Kelly, Nathaniel Martello-White and Chris England. She argues that a new kind of audience is needed – for the plays as for life – the “[p]articularly ‘alert spectator’ [who] when people reach out for (fake) uncertainties amidst confusing uncertainty is able to develop a double vision: a postmodern and a post-postmodern one.”

A central tenet of Tom Cornford’s “Experiencing Nationlessness: Staging the Migrant Condition in Some Recent British Theatre” is that “our global crisis [. . .] is not a crisis of refugees, but a crisis of borders.” His paper addresses the way in which the plight of the migrant/refugee is addressed in plays by Zinnie Harris, the Isango Ensemble and Zodwa Nyoni, stressing the difference between the experiences recounted; and emphasising also the particular significance of these narratives: “In a culture as Eurocentric as the British theatre predominantly remains, the engagement of such differential experiences requires of us, as researchers, that we actively seek out perspectives from theatre-makers of colour.”

In “Multiculturalism, (Im)Migration: the National Arts Centre, Ottawa, a Case of Staging Canadian Nationalism,” Yana Meerzon considers these issues in the context of Canada, “the first country in the world that institutionalised principles of multiculturalism.” She then considers the problematic representation of the celebration of difference in *Kim’s Convenience* (2014), a highly successful production staged by the National Arts Centre in Ottawa: made doubly problematic because the NAC is the only fully government subsidised theatre company in Canada, thereby effectively legitimising what she sees as a sentimental and ideologically loaded creation.

Staying on the North American continent, Camille Barrera’s “‘For We Are American’: Postmodern Pastiche and National Identity in Anne Washburn’s *Mr Burns, a Post-Electric Play*” offers an in-depth analysis of a 2012 play that “traces the afterlife of an episode of *The Simpsons* in a post-apocalyptic United States.” In particular, she considers the significance of the two different endings to the play as a move away from what audiences perceived as an optimistic celebration of the urge to continue to make stories, and towards a much more bleak vision of the future. Central to her analysis is the idea of the “myth of myth” and its role in the construction of models of national patriotism.

Ciara Murphy’s “‘The State of Us’: Challenging State-Led Narratives through Performance during Ireland’s ‘Decade of Centenaries’” considers the way in which the official ‘celebration’ of the centenary of, in particular, the 1916 Easter Rising was deliberately problematized by two productions staged at the 2016 Dublin Theatre Festival – *These Rooms* and *It’s Not Over*. Both plays had elements of audience participation, and Murphy argues that this “was in order to encourage their audiences to delve more deeply into the more problematic associations of

historical events.” The resultant questioning opened up a range of issues about nation and nationalism that still resonate one hundred years later.

In “The State We’re in: Violence and Working-Class Women on and off the Contemporary Irish Stage,” Tom Maguire’s focus is on “the naturalistic dramatic representation of the home as a domestic sphere for poor women [which] may confound nationalist discourses of the country [Ireland] as home, yet may fail to resist the systematic violence of the state against its most precarious citizens.” He first turns to Sean O’Casey’s work immediately post the 1916 uprising, before considering two contemporary plays – Jacinta Sheerin and Georgina McKeivitt’s *Waiting on Ikea* and Philly McMahon’s *Pineapple* – that address essentially the same issues for working-class women as they did for their counterparts one hundred years earlier.

Benjamin Poore revisits the first period of New Labour (1997–2001) in “Before The Fall: Looking Back on the Royal Shakespeare Company’s ‘This Other Eden’ Season (2001),” concentrating on Moira Buffini’s *Loveplay* and Nick Stafford’s *Luminosity*. He argues that its inability to locate this “Other Eden” geographically was not only evidence of tensions at the second largest theatrical organisation in Britain, second only to London’s National Theatre but, given its status and importance, also of a straining of the new nationalism posited by New Labour.

In “From Chimera to Reality: Lucy Kirkwood’s *Chimerica* or ‘What State Are We in?,’” Christine Kiehl analyses a play that is concerned with the complicated relationship between China and the US in the specific period from 1989 and the Beijing student rebellion to the 2012 American presidential election. Noting that the title of the play signifies that for all the apparent hostility between the two nations, there is at heart a consensus. She argues for it as a state-of-the-nation play, and for its continuing resonance:

On a larger geopolitical scale, the play shows us a confounding similitude between China’s autocracy and America’s liberal democracy when personal freedom is infringed. America’s state of non-belonging in the play is conspicuously resonant with Donald Trump’s policy of closing borders.

The title of Cyrielle Garson’s article – “Does Verbatim Still Talk the Nation Talk” – succinctly sums up the issue that she addresses, with a contention that Verbatim Theatre is continually reanimating itself; and that, as Steve Blandford argues, it is being increasingly recognised as “making a contribution to a national conversation which is opposed to a monolithic sense of the nation or national identity” (Blandford 100). For evidence, she draws from a number of plays, concentrating first on DV8’s *To Be Straight With You* (2007) and then on Catherine Grosvenor’s *Cherry Blossom* (2007), before appropriately concluding on Alecky Blythe’s *Little Revolution* (2014). Appropriately, because the conference was extremely fortunate

in having Alecky Blythe present and in conversation with Chris Megson; and an edited version of that conversation follows on from Garson's article.

In "A Victory for Real People: Dangers in the Discourse of Democracy," Liz Tomlin discusses "some emerging and unsettling parallels between the construction of 'real people' in contemporary theatrical discourse and practice, and that same construction within the political discourse of right-wing politicians in the UK." She is particularly interested in what she describes as the "theatre of real people," as well as verbatim theatre and participatory performance: and in the latter part of her article she relates her concerns from her perspective as an uneasy spectator at performances of Rimini Protokoll's *100 % Salford* (2016), the National Theatre's *My Country* (2017) and Kaleider's *The Money* (2013). Earlier, she argues that this process of 'democratisation,' supposedly allowing the authentic voice of 'real' people to be heard on stage, is a reaction to the dominant mode of state-of-the nation plays from the 1970s on: plays that "exemplified an analysis of the state of the nation from a single individual's political perspective, made more limiting by the prevalence of middle-class, white men in the forefront of the playwriting profession." The deployment of voices from outside of this demographic stresses their authenticity both as non-actors and, in class terms, as not a part of the traditional liberal-elite theatre audience. Tomlin sees this construction of the real replicated in recent political campaigning, citing for example the then UKIP leader Nigel Farage's words immediately before the result of the EC referendum was declared: "If the predictions now are right, this will be a victory for real people, a victory for ordinary people, a victory for decent people." The effective conclusion to the first part of her article is worth quoting in full, as it will provide a very suitable ending to this Introduction: not only because it was written in the context of the worrying times that all the contributors to this collection address, but in the light of what we are now beginning to know about the way in which the tactics that she describes were greatly aided by the use of sophisticated IT intervention.

The unspoken correlation of 'real people' and low economic status is, of course, important to be kept unspoken in right wing and mainstream political rhetoric precisely because those speaking it do not wish to highlight the degree to which their own privilege sets them apart from the 'real, ordinary people' with whom they are claiming kinship. By excluding economic discourse, and keeping the emphasis on a parochial, nationalist, patriarchal, conservative and heteronormative 'ordinariness,' signified by a pint in the pub, or sexist 'locker room' banter, Farage and U.S. President Donald Trump, who operates precisely the same tactic, can maintain the fiction that they are real and ordinary too, just like those who vote for them, when understood in opposition to the liberal social values and cosmopolitanism of the so-called elite.

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